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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TEACHER UNION STRIKE FORCES CASH-STRAPPED

SURINAMESE GOVT TO OFFER CIVIL SERVANT SALARY INCREASE

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SUMMARY  
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1. In the first case of labor unrest this year, the Union of High School Teachers (BVL) began a strike on February 17 to protest the government's refusal to fulfill terms of a 1998 agreement between the Wijdenbosch administration (1996-2000) and civil servants. In response, Minister of Education Walter Sandriman denounced the strikes and announced legal action against the union to force the teachers to return to work. However, BVL, buoyed by statements of support by other labor organizations, is promising to maintain its hardline position until the government accedes to its demands. While the teachers' strike is limited in scope at this time, it has already exacted a heavy price -- a civil servant salary increase -- which the cash-strapped government can not afford, and may touch off other strikes that may deteriorate Suriname's already battered economy. End Summary.

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TEACHERS: GOVET RENEGED ON ITS PROMISES  
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2. In the first case of labor unrest for the new year, the Union of High School Teachers (BVL) went on strike on February 17 after talks with the Ministry of Education over the granting of allowances reached a deadlock. To exert pressure on the government, the union mobilized high school students to demonstrate at the Ministry of Education to the dismay of some members of the public. On the following day, BVL led a peaceful street demonstration with about 140 adults in front of the Vice President's office which is also the venue for the regularly scheduled Council of Ministers' meeting which was then in session.

3. The disagreement between the government and BVL stemmed from the GOS' refusal to follow through on a 1998 agreement brokered by the Wijdenbosch administration (1996-2000). Under this agreement, the government granted civil servants a clothing and a professional development allowance fixed at 12 percent and 18 percent of 1998 salaries, respectively. In addition, it agreed to a clause allowing for a renegotiation of allowances contingent upon changes in the country's economic situation. The Venetiaan administration insisted that it could not fulfill the terms of the agreement since it intends to terminate allowances once it fully restructures civil service salary scales. At the same time, to pacify the BVL and other labor unions that may follow BVL's lead, the government granted one concession: a 10 percent salary increase -- a 5 percent increase in March and another in September of this year. However, this concession was not enough to satisfy the BVL, which maintained that the government still had to meet its obligations under the 1998 agreement. (Note: The Federation of Teachers Unions (FOLS), whose chairman is a high-ranking member in the ruling New Front coalition's Suriname Labor Party (SPA), has accepted the government's 10 percent salary increase. To quell the labor unrest, FOLS has offered to mediate between BVL and the Ministry of Education. End Note).

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THE GOVT'S RESPONSE  
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4. During a February 17 press conference, Minister of Education Walter Sandriman condemned the teachers' strike and announced legal actions against BVL. Sandriman accused BVL chairman Wilgo Valies of exploiting the teachers and the students for the sake of his own political ambitions and disparaged the teachers for interrupting classes. In addition, Sandriman vowed that he would go to the courts to force the striking teachers to resume their duties to uphold the "no work, no pay" principle reinstituted by the Venetiaan administration last year.

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TEACHERS: WE ARE MAINTAINING OUR GROUND  
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15. In response to the Minister's statement, BVL chairman

Wilgo Valies told the press that the union would not back down despite the threat of legal action against it. Buoyed by statements of support from the labor federation de Moederbond, among others, a confident Valies asserted that he welcomed a court case and that he expects the judge to uphold the 1998 agreement and rule in favor of the union. In the meantime, he said, the teachers are prepared to continue the strike until the government meets their demand.

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COMMENT  
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16. The BVL strike is the first serious strike faced by the Venetiaan administration in some time. Given Suriname's long tradition of labor activity and the role of teachers' unions as lightning rods for labor unrests that have brought down previous governments, the BVL strike poses a legitimate threat to the Venetiaan administration, which can not afford to lose public support so close to the 2005 elections. The strike has already exacted a heavy price since to pacify strikers, the administration offered a civil servant salary increase that will certainly have a negative impact on Suriname's already sputtering economy and may encourage other unions to seek similar pay raises.

BARNES

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